

Guidebook: Crafting a Results-Driven Request for Proposals (RFP)



HARVARD Kennedy School
Government Performance Lab

Table of Contents

Introduction	3
<i>Learn how to use this guide and how to leverage procurement to improve the outcomes of government programs and services</i>	
Module 1: Planning for Your RFP	6
<i>Identify key team members for your RFP and set up project management structures</i>	
Module 2: Information Gathering to Inform Your RFP	15
<i>Conduct market research, engage key stakeholders and service recipients, and learn from prior service delivery</i>	
Module 3: RFP Writing - Problem Statements and Goals	24
<i>Create consensus internally and with vendors around the problem you aim to solve and what a successful outcome looks like</i>	
Module 4: RFP Writing - Scope of Work and Incentives	32
<i>Craft a scope of work and a payment structure that aligns the vendor's incentives with your goals and offers vendors the opportunity to propose new solutions to your problem</i>	
Module 5: RFP Writing - Metrics and Contract Management	43
<i>Select metrics to track vendor performance and learn how to actively manage your contract to create opportunities for continuous learning and improvement</i>	
Module 6: RFP Writing - Evaluation and Selection Criteria	52
<i>Design a set of evaluation criteria and proposal submission requirements that will allow you to identify the important aspects of proposals and reward the approaches most likely to be successful</i>	
Module 7: Finalizing Your RFP	61
<i>Organize and structure your RFP draft to communicate clearly to vendors, and plan for soliciting feedback on your RFP draft</i>	
Module 8: Activities Following RFP Release	67
<i>Plan for important activities that happen after RFP release, including hosting a pre-proposal conference, evaluating proposals and drafting, negotiating, and managing a contract that reinforces good performance</i>	
Closing	75
<i>Reflect on what you have learned and consider opportunities to use results-driven contracting to improve other programs and services your government funds</i>	



A large, bold, black letter 'O' is centered on the page, serving as a background for the title.

Introduction

Introduction

The resources contained in this guidebook will help public sector organizations leverage procurement to improve the outcomes of government-funded programs and services, including by writing results-driven requests for proposals (RFPs) and by better managing the RFP development process.

Overview

Nearly every important government activity combines the efforts of government employees with goods and services acquired from the private sector. This is true of building roads, collecting and recycling trash, and providing job training to the unemployed. Unfortunately, governments often treat procurement as a rushed, back-office administrative function, rather than as a core strategic activity to achieve their mission and goals.

In our work with state and local governments across the country, we have helped governments create greater public value by developing RFPs aimed at improving outcomes and by improving the effectiveness of procurement and contracting practices.

Results-driven contracting is a set of strategies designed to help governments use procurement and contracting to achieve better outcomes for residents, businesses, and community stakeholders.

Results-driven contracting aims to:

1. Transform the procurement process to be efficient, inviting, and transparent;
2. Improve the outcomes of contracted programs, products, and services;
3. Invest in equity to improve economic mobility and achieve better outcomes for historically marginalized populations; and
4. Elevate and resource procurement as a strategic function.

You have probably already noticed opportunities for improvement in your jurisdiction's procurement practices. Your government may struggle to plan for upcoming procurements or conduct sufficient market analysis before developing a scope of work. You might wonder if including so many specific requirements in your RFPs is discouraging vendors from being innovative. When managing contracts, you may feel like you spend more time on compliance and processing invoices instead of working with the vendor to improve performance.

We know that for many government staff, writing an RFP can feel daunting. As you face an upcoming need for services, you may be tempted to fall back on a previously issued version of an RFP, simply mimic what a peer city or state has done, or renew an existing contract – even though you know you could probably find a better performing vendor.

What will you learn from this guidebook?

Through the eight modules outlined below, we will walk you through the RFP process step by step, from early planning through managing a contract. We will also help you manage the process to reduce delays.

- Module 1: Planning for Your RFP
- Module 2: Information Gathering to Inform Your RFP
- Module 3: RFP Writing - Problem

Statement and Goals

- Module 4: RFP Writing - Scope of Work and Incentives
- Module 5: RFP Writing - Metrics and Contract Management
- Module 6: RFP Writing - Evaluation and Selection Criteria
- Module 7: Finalizing Your RFP
- Module 8: Activities Following RFP Release

In each of these modules, you will first learn about best practices for the specific topic area covered by that module. We follow this with examples from other jurisdictions to help you see what this work looks like in practice. Finally, each module contains two interactive sub-sections: 1) discussion questions, which you will use as an internal brainstorming tool to generate consensus around the ideas your RFP will communicate, and 2) planning and drafting prompts, which will help you create the written content you will incorporate directly into your RFP draft.

Who should use this guidebook?

The primary audience for this guidebook is department-level program managers, buyers, contract analysts, and other procurement and contracting professionals. Executive leaders in state and local government will also find this guidebook helpful in building linkages between procurement and their strategic goals.

For which procurements will this guidebook be most helpful?

Given limited resources, not every upcoming RFP should receive the intensive level of targeted assistance this guidebook promotes. This intensive approach is often most appropriate for: 1) contracts large in dollar amount or in program reach; 2) contracts that reflect strategic policy priorities for the department or for

executive leadership; 3) contracts that involve a high level of risk; or 4) contracts that have not made sufficient progress in achieving desired outcomes.

Using this guidebook

We encourage you to make this guidebook your own. Components of this document may be more useful or relevant for different audiences or experience levels. You may find that some modules are the exact help you need, while other modules already reflect your current RFP development practices.

Your jurisdiction may already have clearly defined procedures that come at each of these steps. Think of the guidebook as a supplementary resource to complement local best practices. Identify what you might be able to add from this guidebook's toolbox to ensure that your jurisdiction has an appropriately strategic lens applied to your procurement and contracting activities.

About us & contact information

The Government Performance Lab at the Harvard Kennedy School conducts research on how governments can improve the results they achieve for their residents. An important part of this research model involves providing pro bono technical assistance to state and local governments. Through this hands-on involvement, the Government Performance Lab gains insights into the barriers that governments face and the solutions that can overcome these barriers. For more information about the Government Performance Lab, please visit our website: www.govlab.hks.harvard.edu.

If you have questions while using this guidebook or would like to receive additional support from the Government Performance Lab, reach out to us at govlab@hks.harvard.edu.



Planning for Your RFP

Module 1: Planning for Your RFP

In this module, you will:

- Identify key team members to be part of the RFP process
- Plan the timeline for your RFP and set up project management structures

1.1 Best Practices

Once your department or agency leadership has secured approval for a new service or purchase, or once you have noticed that a contract is soon to expire, you might be tempted to immediately begin writing your RFP! However, jumping into RFP writing without conducting proper planning can create problems down the road.

As you dive into planning for this RFP, you are committing to a results-driven approach to writing an RFP that is likely a departure from business as usual. You will be moving from viewing an RFP as a necessary hurdle to get a vendor hired to seeing the RFP as a strategic opportunity to help your department or agency achieve its strategic goals and improve outcomes for residents. This is an exciting journey to embark on!

In this module, we will discuss two important planning activities to devote time to before you begin conducting research on your service or product and writing your RFP. Building your project team with care and developing a project plan will lay the foundation for a successful RFP.

Building a Well-Rounded Project Team

First, identify which internal team members have a role to play or would be helpful to include in each stage of the RFP process, from early planning and research through contract execution. These individuals might include program and procurement/purchasing staff, department/agency leadership, managers, end-users of the service or product, legal or finance teams, and staff who have procured similar services in the past. You will identify and engage additional external stakeholders in the next module, as they will provide valuable insight into your target population, best practices, and the feasibility of your approach.

Thoughtfully building your internal project team and including important voices from within your jurisdiction will enrich the final content of your RFP, help you align with leadership's priorities, and reach alignment on contract outcomes. This effort will also help you and your team gain early clarity on roles and responsibilities, avoid instances of duplicated work, and complete all tasks promptly.

KEY CONCEPT: CHARACTERISTICS OF STRONG RFP TEAMS

1	Defined role of project manager/coordinator. It can be helpful to designate one person to coordinate roles, keep RFP development on schedule, and manage the process overall. This person should be someone who can devote adequate time to this project, keep documents and drafts well organized, facilitate meetings, and help to reconcile differences in opinions.
2	Designated responsibilities among procurement staff and program/department staff. Depending on your jurisdiction, RFP development and contracting responsibilities may fall to purchasing or procurement staff, department or program staff, or (as is often the case) be divided among these groups. Early on, make sure your team includes expertise on both the subject matter AND procurement processes, rules and regulations. Gain clarity on roles for each team member.
3	Perspective and input from front-line staff. The staff closest to the problem that you are aiming to address with this RFP will have the most in-depth knowledge about what the service or product really looks like on the ground. Involving front-line staff in the RFP planning and drafting process will allow these individuals to provide valuable input on a service or product that they will be interacting with very closely.
4	Identified decision makers and RFP approval authority. Unanticipated reviews, or surprise last-minute input from decision makers (who you might not have known wanted to weigh in!) can delay the release of your RFP. Early in your planning, identify which decision makers will need to review or approve at each step. For example, will you need to consult your legal team? How much time will they need to approve your document? These decision makers may not have an extensive role early on, but identifying their role and putting this RFP on their radar is good practice.
5	Clarity on the team's time and capacity. Many state and local government staff wear a variety of hats and balance competing priorities. When building your team, be realistic about the amount of time each member can or will devote to this RFP. Can you carve out small roles for folks you think will have valuable input but do not have the time to be intimately involved (e.g., department staff that recently wrote similar RFPs, legal, finance, or data teams)?

Developing a Project Plan

At this early stage, it may be hard to know what activities lie ahead. While it can be tempting to wait to address tasks as they come up, planning ahead will help you complete your RFP and final contract much more efficiently. Even if the RFP content is terrific, poor project management practices can derail what otherwise would have been a very successful RFP or an effective contract. For example, in your previous work, you might have seen the harmful impact of waiting until the last minute to work on an RFP or forgetting to consult with a group of key stakeholders.

With your RFP team and in consultation with your procurement/purchasing staff, you should develop a project plan (you might call this your work plan or timeline) that includes all of the major steps that will need to take place before your jurisdiction executes a contract with the successful proposer. In building this project plan, you will start to lift the curtain on what the next months will look like. A timeline or work plan can also accomplish the key task of helping to hold all members of your team accountable—to motivate action—especially if other responsibilities are likely to compete for their time and attention.

When developing your project plan, you likely will want to start with the end date – the date by which your contract will be executed (i.e., when you need the vendor to start work) and work backwards. Check with your procurement/purchasing staff to see how long similar procurements have taken in the past to make sure your timeline is reasonable. As you build your timeline, you might find yourself with less time than you expected for each of the activities leading towards an executed contract. If you find yourself needing to reduce the timeline, consider which activities you can conduct in parallel or where you could reduce time between internal deadlines. The one place you should never cut time from is the proposal response period. The quality of proposals you receive will be much higher if you give proposers sufficient time to prepare thoughtful responses!

1.2 Example

In one jurisdiction that the GPL has worked with, department staff use a project planning tool to set target dates for key activities associated with each upcoming RFP. This tool also helps the department identify which responsibilities belong to program staff and which belong to procurement staff. The example below is a snapshot of some initial activities that the department includes in the planning stage for an RFP.

Name of RFP: _____					
<i>Staffing leads</i>					-
PROGRAM STAFF:					
PROCUREMENT STAFF:					-
TASK		RESPONSIBILITY			TARGET DATE
		Procurement	Program	Staff Member(s)	
1.0	Planning				
1.1	Determine source of funding, finalize the project budget, and council authority				
1.2	Develop project timeline for major activities – release date, submission date, and pre-proposal conference				
1.3	Choose procurement method				
1.4	Conduct strategic planning to establish goals, performance metrics				

MODULE 1: WORKBOOK

1.3 DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Gather your team and brainstorm answers to the questions below. Your answers to these questions will help inform the creation of a project team and project plan in the next section.

1. In your jurisdiction, what responsibilities does your procurement/purchasing staff hold for a typical RFP (in comparison to program/department staff)?

2. Whom might you need to consult to check that your team is following all legal and policy requirements as you plan and draft your RFP?

3. Who in your jurisdiction has recently completed a similar RFP and could have valuable input for your project team?

4. Looking back at past RFPs, which steps took the longest? Where were delays most likely to occur?

1.4 PLANNING PROMPTS

1. Build a project team matrix, similar to the version below, to identify the internal stakeholders for the RFP project team. We have filled out row one as an example.

INTERNAL STAKEHOLDER ROLES			
Name and position of internal stakeholder	In what areas can this person offer support, critical input, or feedback?	What does this person’s capacity look like during the next four months?	Stakeholder role
Example: Jane Martinez, Performance Analyst in the Mayor’s Office	Example: Jane would provide helpful input on the performance metrics we develop to monitor the vendor’s work.	Example: Jane thinks she can devote 5 hours per month for the next 4 months.	Example: ___ RFP drafting team <u>X</u> Consultant ___ Decision-maker ___ Supporter

2. Build your project plan. Below we share a basic structure as an example. You will likely want to create a table similar to this one and add additional rows for activities specific to your jurisdiction or this RFP.

PROJECT TIMELINE		
Activity	Target date or date range	Notes (e.g., who will be responsible, what this activity will include, what could potentially delay this activity)
Basic project organization completed (budget identified, timeline finished, & project team created)		
Information gathering completed		
RFP draft completed		
RFP review by decision makers		
RFP release date		
Deadline for proposer questions		
RFP responses due	<i>(at least 6 weeks after RFP release)</i>	
Evaluation committee first-round scoring completed		
Interviews/demos held		
Awardee(s) selection date		
Contract negotiations and drafting		
Contract approval process		
Contract executed		



Information Gathering to Inform your RFP

Module 2: Information Gathering to Inform Your RFP

In this module, you will:

- Gather critical information and conduct market research to inform your RFP drafting
- Engage stakeholders and end-users to learn from prior service delivery
- Understand the needs of those who will receive your service or use your product and the ability of vendors to meet those needs

2.1 Best Practices

Now that you have a good understanding of your timeline and the makeup of your project team, you are ready to start gathering information to inform how you write your RFP!

When writing a results-driven RFP, the steps you take to gather information before writing are fundamental to building your understanding of the context your RFP falls within, the problem your government is aiming to solve with the RFP, and your vision for a successful outcome.

In this section, we will help you identify the needs of those who will receive your service or use your product and the ability of vendors to meet those needs. If you have previously contracted for this service or product, this is also the time to assess the impact of prior service delivery and the opportunities for improvement in your service model.

As part of your information-gathering process, you will speak to stakeholders, including:

- *End-users or program recipients*: individuals who will benefit from this service or product and will have the best sense of their needs and what a successful service or product would look like. These could be external end-users (e.g., families attending an early childhood program) or internal end-users (e.g., police officers using mobile data computers in their patrol cars).
- *Front-line staff and supervisors*: individuals delivering services or managing programs who can offer insights into how service delivery currently operates and opportunities for improvement.
- *Administrators in other departments*: auditors, inspectors or finance staff who may have previously explored the cost, effectiveness, performance, or compliance of vendors previously delivering services.
- *Vendors or providers*: organizations who have offered this service in the past or could in the future and may be able to give you a better sense of the potential capacity and expertise of the marketplace. A benefit of vendor engagement can also be informing the marketplace of the direction the government is headed in terms of planned service delivery (e.g., funding a new community program, or dividing one large citywide contract into smaller opportunities to bring more vendors in).

- *Subject matter experts*: representatives from associations or community-based non-profits who could provide you with broader context about your RFP, help you understand community needs, or share information about the marketplace.

Depending on the complexity of the RFP and how much time you are able to allocate, this information-gathering stage could range from a few weeks to six months.

Understanding Your Users to Better Direct and Deliver Services

For routine government services or software products (e.g., library custodial services or a new public transit app), it may feel unnecessary to spend time thinking about the recipients of your service or product. However, there is still a population benefitting from the service or product! For library custodial services, for example, the service recipients might be users of your city's libraries. Consider how proper cleaning and maintenance of facilities could impact the experience of these users – a parent/tot book group needs clean rugs to gather on, visitors and staff need clean bathrooms, and individuals with underlying medical conditions need public spaces to be cleaned and sanitized periodically. For a new public transit app, as another example, your target population is all of the individuals who will be using the app. Different sub-groups of individuals using the app likely have different needs, such as those whose primary language is not English or those with limited technology experience.

Take steps to understand the needs of those using or benefitting from the service or product. What qualitative and quantitative data have you previously captured or could you capture about their needs?

Looking at Past Performance to Understand Previous Effectiveness

If you are issuing an RFP for an existing service that your government provides, you will want to spend sufficient time understanding the effectiveness of your service delivery model.

First, look back at the prior RFP process to procure this service. How successful was the previous procurement? Maybe you did not receive as many proposals as you hoped. Maybe the vendors found the RFP confusing and had numerous questions. What can you learn about how to improve the RFP this time around from looking back at the last one?

Second, spend time with stakeholders to assess what's working and what's not working about how current vendors are providing this service. Internally, consider: what data do you have about whether these vendors are meeting your goals? What are common complaints from service recipients, program managers, or inspectors?

Your current vendors will also have valuable insights about performance! They can probably tell you what works well about the current scope of services. You might ask them: what outcomes have been difficult to achieve? How could the City work with them in a more effective, more collaborative way? You might also observe the service offered in person, or create process maps to improve your understanding of service delivery.

Third, think about what has changed since your current model of service began. How have the needs

of the population receiving your service changed? Have external disruptions, such as a public health crisis or economic downturn, meant that the population requiring your service has changed? Have increased or reduced investments meant that the larger service landscape has changed regarding what other similar services are being provided to your recipients?

Conducting Market Research to Understand what Vendors Can Offer

Before drafting your RFP, take steps to understand the pool of potential vendors, the services they are able to offer, and whether your budget is feasible. This can be a moment to be curious about what other cities or states are doing - or if any new solutions have emerged since the last time you procured for the service or product.

KEY CONCEPT: MARKET RESEARCH OPPORTUNITIES	
1	<p>Internet research can be a great starting place, which you likely know well already! Use internet research as a first step to understand what similar programs exist and what firms or organizations might be able to meet your needs. Since many governments publicly post their RFPs online, you may be able to find good examples of RFPs for similar services. Internet research can also be a starting point to understand the demographics of service recipients, and historical injustices related to the program or service context.</p>
2	<p>Speaking with associations or peer cities can be an easy way to understand what best practices exist in contracting for a specific service or product. Your peer cities, counties, or states have likely experienced some of the same challenges you have. Don't be shy about picking up the phone or sending an email!</p>
3	<p>Vendor interviews or focus groups can help you understand what products and services are out there, how they work, and who they serve. Vendors bring valuable expertise! You might learn that the product or service that best meets the needs of your target population is different than the one you planned on soliciting.</p>
4	<p>Requests for Information (RFIs) and Concept Papers. An RFI is an informal solicitation of ideas, solutions and/or recommendations to assist in the development of a scope of work for an RFP. An RFI does NOT result in a contract being awarded, but is used instead as a fact-finding activity to gather information about the marketplace. You can use an RFI to get feedback or advice from expert vendors to strengthen an upcoming solicitation. Because it is shared widely with your vendor pool, it can be an easy way to give all vendors the chance to hear about an opportunity and give feedback.</p> <p>Similarly, a Concept Paper can be a tool used pre-RFP to announce your RFP vision and plan to the vendor community. This can be especially helpful for new or substantially redesigned programs or services, or when you have changed your RFP process. In a Concept Paper, you often will share your proposed programmatic approach, goals and objectives, and RFP components. There will then be an opportunity to hear feedback and suggestions from vendors, stakeholders and researchers prior to writing the RFP. You might find it useful to pair the release of your Concept Paper with a vendor meeting to explain the new concept or approach you are taking.</p>

Check with your local procurement expert; in most jurisdictions, it is OK for the government to have conversations with potential vendors as long as you operate transparently, include numerous firms or organizations in the discussions, and these conversations happen before the start of RFP drafting. You should never discuss specific conditions of the RFP, nor should you allow potential vendors to draft or revise RFP language. For example, it is inappropriate to show a potential vendor the draft scope of work, submission requirements, or evaluation criteria before you release an RFP.

Information Gathering in a Social Service Context

If you are working on an RFP for social or human services, you should take additional steps to understand the needs of the population receiving your services, and how the target population will be matched with and referred to services.

First, understand the target population receiving your services. Who are the intended recipients of your services? What socioeconomic and demographic data do you have about this population? What qualitative data have you previously captured or could you capture about their needs? Your goals in understanding the target population are to:

- Move from a broad population definition to more specifically defining the target population.
- Give your proposers a clear picture of this population using local data or statistics
- Describe the specific challenges the population faces, incorporating the voices and perspectives of the population when possible.
- Be able to call the proposer's attention to any key sub-populations (e.g., LGBTQ+ homeless youth within a broader homeless population) with specific needs, challenges, or disparate outcomes that may require more specialized offerings.

Second, think about how you are identifying service recipients and referring or matching those individuals to services. When exploring who actually receives your services, you might find that your program is not reaching those most in need of support, or that your service delivery has not met the needs of historically marginalized communities.

Third, if you are continuing an existing social service or community program, explore whom the program or service actually served. Did some individuals end up on a waitlist? What was the program's recruitment or referral process? Did the service you offered match recipient or user needs? In the next module, you will use the information you have gathered about your target population to closely inform your problem statement.

Synthesizing What You Have Learned

You will gather quite a bit of useful information throughout these activities. The next planning prompt encourages you to synthesize and organize what you have learned so that, in the next module, you can use this research to inform your understanding of the problem your RFP aims to solve.

2.2 Example

Imagine that you work in a Department of Community Services that holds contracts with three service providers who prepare and serve a healthy lunch to seniors on weekdays at six senior centers. You are planning to issue a new RFP, since these contracts will expire in the next year. You want to investigate how well services are being delivered and whether they meet the needs of your target population. Here are the activities that your research process might include:

Understanding previously delivered services

- Hold an initial meeting with staff who directly supervise the contracted meal providers. Understand how they currently measure the performance of these vendors, what works well about the current model for this meal program, and where there have been problems.
- Speak with each of the three providers. What is working for them? Do they have any ideas for improvement, efficiency, or better meeting the needs of the seniors in this program? What contract requirements have been difficult or costly for them to meet? What could make the collaboration between the government and the vendor more effective?
- Explore overall satisfaction with the meal provider and program by dropping in on lunch one day and speaking directly with staff and seniors. You might ask questions such as:
 - ⇒ Do the meals served consistently meet the county's health and nutritional standards?
 - ⇒ Do the meals served arrive on time each day?
 - ⇒ Do the meals taste good? What would make them better?
 - ⇒ Is the right amount of food provided on each plate? Are there often meals left over? Do you have to turn seniors away due to lack of meals?

Understanding your target population

- Gather data about the demographics of the seniors regularly receiving these meals. Are the seniors receiving this service the ones that this program aims to target?
- What groups of seniors might be eligible for this program but aren't showing up? Why might that be?
- How are seniors referred to this program? How is the program advertised?

Conducting market research

- Understand what the landscape of potential service providers looks like. Are there many other catering businesses locally that could provide these meals? Do you anticipate there might be other organizations out there interested in delivering these services?
- Speak with other county governments who offer similar meal service programs.
- Assess the program's entire budget to identify if the budget matches the full set of resources required. Ask if the prices your county pays seem reasonable compared to similar meal programs run by peers.

MODULE 2: WORKBOOK

2.3 DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Gather your team and brainstorm answers to the questions below. Your answers to these questions will help inform the creation of a project team and project plan in the next section.

1. What data and information can you collect about current service delivery? Does vendor performance data exist? Would it be appropriate to observe service delivery in action? Is there anything that program managers or vendors might be resistant to sharing honestly?

2. Who are the intended recipients of this program or product? What are their needs?

3. What level of market research feels appropriate given your gaps of knowledge and timeframe? Would a Request for Information (RFI) or focus group help enrich your understanding of the market and potential solutions?

4. Additional notes:

2.4 PLANNING PROMPTS

After conducting market research and understanding the effectiveness of current service delivery, it is time to synthesize and organize your findings. We suggest you organize your findings in a table similar to the one below. We have filled in the first row as an example, with a potential finding from our senior meal services example.

RESEARCH SYNTHESIS		
Research discovery	Implication/impact	How we will address in the RFP
<p><i>Example:</i></p> <p><i>Vendor A has trouble delivering meals on time because they deliver meals to two senior centers on opposite ends of the county.</i></p>	<p><i>Example:</i></p> <p><i>Because of this, clients at one senior center often must wait 30-40 minutes for lunch, which has led to a drop in clients at that senior center.</i></p>	<p><i>Example:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Add a performance metric to capture data about on-time meal delivery. - Allocate contracts differently so that providers are serving senior centers closer in distance.



RFP Writing: Problem Statements & Goals

Module 3: RFP Writing - Problem Statements & Goals

In this module, you will:

- Understand how to communicate the problem you want to solve to potential bidders and clearly articulate what a successful outcome looks like, especially as it connects to your jurisdiction's overall goals.
- Draft a problem statement and at least three key goals for your RFP, to help your proposers understand what you view as a successful outcome from the resulting contract.

3.1 Best Practices

Now that you have put together a project plan, built your team, and done sufficient research to understand the needs of your service recipients and how you might improve service delivery, it is time to start drafting your RFP!

Problem Statements

Beginning your RFP with a problem statement that effectively communicates the challenge you are facing is the first step in designing a procurement focused on results. By painting a clear picture of the problem that the vendor will help you solve, you begin to ground the procurement in a real issue and invite a more creative, problem-focused range of solutions. Furthermore, by opening with a problem statement, you can specify your jurisdiction's goals to solve that problem (more on that later!).

For example, if a contract for homeless services defines the problem as lack of shelter bed capacity, the range of possible solutions is narrowed to only those that increase the number of shelter beds, and likely limits possible respondents to only shelter providers. If the problem is instead framed more broadly as one of "housing instability," this invites more wide-ranging, creative, and potentially cost-effective solutions.

KEY CONCEPT: CHARACTERISTICS OF GOOD PROBLEM STATEMENTS

1	<p>Connects the department's priorities to a clear and specific outcome goal.</p> <p>Problem statements contain the seeds of your definition of success. Tying the problem to a specific set of goals clarifies departmental priorities for the vendor community and provides a standard against which you will judge services. If you are making major changes to service delivery or programmatic changes, you might find that the RFP's problem statement is the place to expand on why those changes are being made and how changing the service model connects to your outcome goal(s).</p>
2	<p>Clearly explains how where you are today differs from where you want to be.</p> <p>Illustrating the difference between the present state and your desired end state offers a clear sense of what progress would look like and invites vendors to think about how they can help get you there. Good problem statements often use a "from - to" description to signal to vendors key priorities or expectations for <i>changing</i> the current state.</p>
3	<p>Quantifies key variables related to where you are today and where you want to be.</p> <p>What are the data or statistics that help illustrate the gap between your desired future state and the status quo? Quantifying the different aspects of your problem, where possible, and sharing that information with vendors can help indicate the scale of the problem and how you would assess success in solving the problem.</p>
4	<p>Includes description of end-users or the target population to receive services and clarifies their needs.</p> <p>Good problem statements will clearly describe the intended recipients or end-users of the service or product. For social service RFPs, we encourage you to revisit Module 2 to learn about assessing the needs and demographics of your target population.</p>
5	<p>Sufficiently focused to be actionable.</p> <p>A problem statement that is too broad may not allow vendors to propose sufficiently detailed solutions. Specifying a target population, describing current services, and sharing past program data can help narrow the definition of the problem while also allowing providers flexibility to propose innovative solutions.</p>
6	<p>As neutral as possible about possible problem diagnosis or solutions.</p> <p>Good problem statements assume little about why the problem exists or what solutions could be appropriate. By avoiding specific solutions in the problem statement, you leave space for vendors to draw on their own expertise and offer solutions you may not have considered.</p>

Goals

While the problem statement grounds the RFP in a well-defined challenge, articulating clear goals allows you to define for vendors what success looks like – what it looks like when the problems are addressed. A clear definition of success is a critical input for all other results-driven contracting strategies. It informs how you will select vendors, what metrics you track over the course of the contract, how you structure the contract, and how you design your next procurement.

KEY CONCEPT: CHARACTERISTICS OF STRONG GOAL STATEMENTS

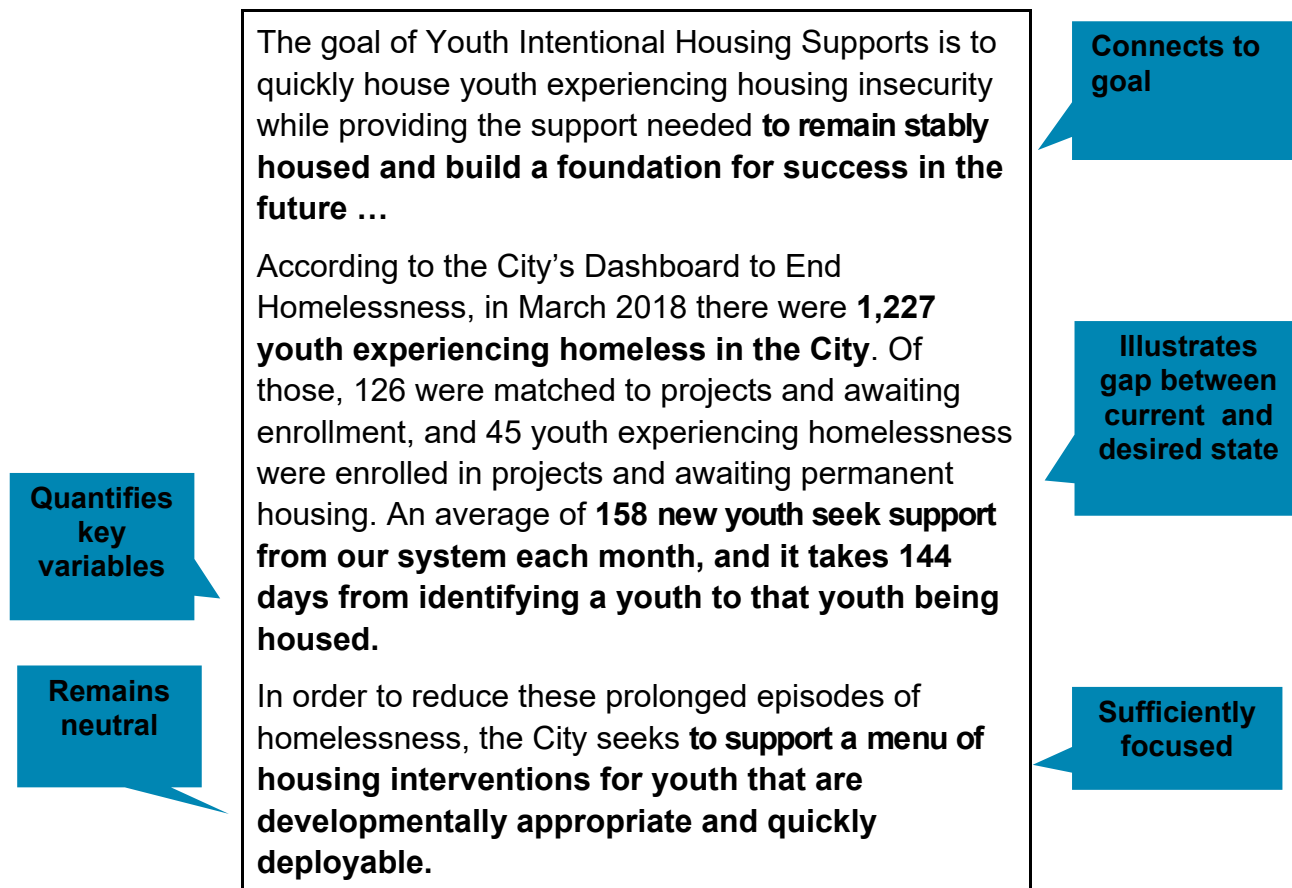
1	Relate to outcomes rather than inputs, outputs, or processes Inputs are the ingredients that go into the activities provided under the contract, like dollars spent, number of staff, materials used, etc. Outputs measure the completion of the activities themselves, like clients served, miles paved, number of software subscriptions, etc. Outcomes are the intended results or measurable effects of the contracted activities, like % of clients retaining employment for 90 days, number of citizen complaints about street conditions, etc. Inputs and outputs are important for monitoring vendor progress, but outcome goals should be the overarching focus of the contract.
2	Lend themselves to quantification The benefits of quantifying your problem also apply to your goals. Quantifiable goals define success in a way that you can use to guide and assess the vendor's work. However, not every goal will be easily quantifiable. If that is the case, you could write the goal as a qualitative statement and use creative performance metrics to measure whether the goal has been achieved through survey data or "proxy" measures. Goals differ from performance metrics (see Module 5) in that performance metrics help you measure progress toward the outcome goal.
3	Focused enough to narrow the range of possible responses or interventions to address the problem, i.e., are actionable and realistic Defining your goal precisely can offer useful guidance to vendors. Offering data, critical information, or illustrative examples could provide helpful additional information about your goal. Be careful! The more specific your goal, the more narrow the range of possible solutions.
4	Broad enough to encompass the impact you want to have on residents/beneficiaries and allow room for operational innovation by focusing on the "what" instead of the "how" Goals should be specific enough to be actionable, but not so specific that vendors focus only on those activities and not on bringing their best ideas and approaches to bear on the larger problem.

3.2 Examples

Problem Statement

This example is an excerpt from a city's RFP for youth intentional housing supports. In the callout boxes, we show how this example connects to the characteristics of problem statements.

Youth Intentional Housing Supports RFP



Goals

What do good goals look like in practice? On the left, we show what a typical goal might look like, and on the right, we indicate what an improved version of the goal might look like.

<i>Instead of...</i>	<i>Try</i>
"Provide supportive services run by certified nursing assistants for elderly individuals three times per week."	"Enable elderly individuals to safely live at home by providing services that can decrease placements into long-term nursing care by 30%."
"Provide after-school and summer programs to youth."	"Increase access to, enrollment in, and sustained participation in after-school and summer programs targeted to youth in grades 4-8."

MODULE 3: WORKBOOK

3.3 DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Gather your RFP drafting team and discuss the questions below. Brainstorming around your problem statement and goals ahead of time will help your team when it comes time to write the solicitation.

Problem Statements

1. Imagine that a friend of yours, who lives in but does not work for your jurisdiction, asks you what problem you are trying to solve with this procurement. In your own words, how would you describe the problem to them?

2. What do you know about this problem (including any statistics or data points)? What are the features of this problem that somebody would need to know to solve it?

3. How have you tried to solve this problem in the past? What do you believe were the main obstacles in the path of past efforts?

Goals

1. While it may not always be obvious, this RFP and the resulting contract are opportunities to advance your department’s (or citywide) priorities. Become grounded in those priorities by creating a list of your department’s goals and how this RFP might contribute to achieving those goals, using the table below.

Departmental (or jurisdiction-wide goal)	How this RFP contributes to achieving the goal
<i>Example: Reduce homelessness city-wide</i>	<i>Example: Provides solutions to more quickly house youth experiencing housing insecurity and reduces prolonged episodes of homelessness</i>

2. Imagine that this contract has reached a successful conclusion. How would you describe the success of the project to your boss and what evidence or data would you point to as evidence of success?

3.4 DRAFTING PROMPTS

1. Drawing on your responses from the above set of questions, write a problem statement that reflects the “characteristics of good problem statements”, which you will include in the introduction or background section of your RFP (aim for 200-300 words).

2. Drawing on your responses from the warm up questions, write up to three well-defined goals that you will include in the introduction or background section of your RFP. Depending on the service or product you are procuring for, one overall outcome goal may effectively synthesize what you want to achieve, which is perfectly okay! Make sure your goal(s) correspond with the “characteristics of good goals.”

4 RFP Writing: Scope of Work & Incentives

Module 4: RFP Writing - Scope of Work & Incentives

In this module, you will:

- Learn how to draft a scope of work that aligns vendors' objectives with your contract goals, and offers vendors the opportunity to provide new and impactful solutions.
- Develop, where appropriate, unique payment or contract structures to incentivize vendor performance.

4.1 Best Practices

With a clear definition of the problem you aim to solve and the success you hope to achieve established, you will now develop your scope of work. In this module, we will discuss what it takes to create an inviting and clear scope of work that gives vendors the space to test new or adapt existing approaches to solve your government's problem.

The purpose of a scope of work is to give prospective vendors a clear sense of the work required of them, including how they should bring their expertise to the table. Often, it can be tempting to develop a scope of work that is a long list of tasks for a vendor to do and requirements to meet. The problem with this approach, however, is that it encourages vendors to prioritize compliance over outcomes. This can have a number of unintended consequences. It might result in unnecessary costs that do not meaningfully impact the product or services delivered. It may foster a relationship between you and the vendor that is combative, rather than collaborative. Most critically, by taking this approach, you miss an opportunity to enlist vendors' valuable expertise to better solve your problems.

Rather than writing a scope of work as a prescriptive to-do list, remember that it is fundamentally a job description. The most successful scopes of work anchor on your RFP goals. They set clear expectations and parameters for the project, while leaving space for vendors to bring their expertise to the solution. Prospective vendors should finish reading the scope of work excited about the opportunity to work with your government, and with a clear understanding of: 1) the work required to meet the contract outcomes; 2) opportunities to innovate to achieve these outcomes; and 3) any operational, policy, or legal requirements to which a vendor must adhere.

The specific content you include in your scope of work will be determined by your RFP goals and the context of your project; however, it may draw from elements in the list below. Being realistic about what a vendor can provide given the time, budget and constraints outlined in your scope of work will help generate relevant, high-quality proposals. You likely will want to use the market research you conducted during module 2 to inform your assessment of what is reasonable to ask of a vendor.

- *Expected outputs and deliverables:* What will the vendor need to deliver in support of your goals?
- *Functional requirements or technical specifications:* What is the desired magnitude of the program or service? Who will be the users? Are there specific functions that the solution must perform, or that the program must deliver? What components of your service model are mandatory versus nice-to-have?
- *Project management and communication:* Are there any key timelines or milestones in the project? How will the vendor be working with government staff and what responsibilities will the government retain? How do you expect the vendor to communicate with you about what work they have completed?
- *Compliance:* What are the legal, regulatory, or policy frameworks with which the vendor must comply?

A variety of approaches can be effective for organizing the content in your scope of work. For instance, you may choose to organize the scope of work for a complex project (e.g., social service programs, large-scale IT projects) based on expected outcomes. In contrast, you may choose to organize the scope of work for a more narrowly defined or transactional project (e.g., auditing services or IT hardware) based on operational milestones or related categories of activities. Regardless of your approach, be intentional and logical about the organizational structure you use.

Lastly, as you draft your scope of work, beware of two common pitfalls!

To minimize risk, cities often take the approach of specifying precisely how a vendor shall deliver services (even down to the exact height of the lettering on lawn maintenance equipment!). Specifying this kind of detailed, relatively unimportant information sets up the government-vendor relationship as one where the vendor is executing on systematic directions rather than bringing valuable expertise and a problem-solving mindset to the table. While some specifications are necessary to ensure that vendors follow the law or a government's policy priorities (e.g., workers must wear hardhats at construction sites), other specifications are so limiting that vendors are unable to offer new solutions that might save time and money and produce better outcomes. Rather than prescribing "how" a project should be done in a scope of work, define "what" the city is trying to achieve. Risk can then be managed through performance metrics and your contract management approach, as you will see in module 5.

Remember, a scope of work is not a contract. While it may be important for potential vendors to be aware of future contract terms up front, it can often be confusing or off-putting to include extraneous contract language as part of the scope of work. Consider whether you might include contract terms and conditions in an RFP appendix or omit terms that you will negotiate and finalize after contract award.

KEY CONCEPT: CHARACTERISTICS OF AN EFFECTIVE SCOPE OF WORK	
1	Connects closely to your goals. In Module 3, you identified the goals for your RFP. The scope of work should closely connect to your goals and provide context for the vendor to understand the work that they will need to do in order to achieve these goals.
2	Is well-organized. A clear, logical structure for your scope of work will help the vendor understand what you expect of them. Be intentional about the organizational structure you use to ensure it logically orients vendors towards your goals, communicates your needs, and outlines any operational or regulatory guardrails.
3	Encourages innovation. Vendors are often subject-matter experts who can contribute to the design of innovative and cost-effective approaches to achieving your goal. A well-crafted scope of work leverages these unique capabilities by allowing for a range of solutions, for adaptation of existing approaches, or for new solutions to be tested.
4	Invites collaboration. The scope of work will set the tone for your working relationship with vendors moving forward. It should create a positive impression of your government as a client and set expectations for how you will work together throughout the project. This can be accomplished by using a collaborative tone, clearly defining roles and responsibilities, and (when appropriate) structuring positive incentives for the vendor that are aligned with overarching project goals.
5	Is realistic. From your market research in module 2, you should have a good sense for what vendors are able to provide, and what is attainable given the time and budget for the project. The scope of work should be drafted with these considerations in mind. A realistic RFP will be more likely to receive relevant, high-quality responses.

Using Payments or Contract Structures to Minimize Risk and Incentivize Performance

Your payment structure is another method of minimizing performance risk and encouraging strong vendor performance. There are many ways to incentivize vendors to perform well, including financial incentives (performance payments), transparent vendor performance reviews, and ongoing collaborative contract management. Many of these techniques will be discussed in the following modules.

As you develop your scope of work, consider how you might incorporate any of the following methods of incentivizing vendor performance through your scope of work or payment structure:

KEY CONCEPT: PAYMENT CONSIDERATIONS

1	<p>Timing of payments. Contracts often withhold payment until key deliverables are completed or milestones are met.</p>
2	<p>Collecting metrics or grading vendor performance. Defining, measuring, and discussing performance regularly over the course of the contract, even without performance payments, can provide a meaningful performance incentive.</p>
3	<p>Selecting future work based on vendor performance. A common complement to grading vendor performance is to condition future work on satisfactory performance. This can apply to selecting vendors from a vendor pool, contract extensions, new work under an existing contract, or the opportunity to compete for future contracts.</p>
4	<p>Structure of payments. How payments are structured, of course, can be the most important performance incentive. Here are some of the ways that governments can structure payments to vendors:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fixed Price: Contract is paid as a lump sum based on completing requirements. • Time and Materials: Government pays a vendor over time, based on the dollars spent or hours worked. • Performance Payment: Government pays out some portion of the contract based on performance, measured using process and/or outcome metrics. When designing performance payments, carefully consider what structural barriers vendors will face in their efforts to achieve outcome metrics. Check that you are not basing your performance payments on outcomes that a vendor may be unable to control during the contract term. <p>If a performance payment is not deemed feasible, a fixed price contract will likely be optimal because it ensures that you will not exceed the price agreed upon with the contractor. In a fixed price contract, the risk falls to the contractor that the actual cost of the work will be higher than the price of the contract. Time and materials contracts can generally be appropriate only if there is high uncertainty about the extent or duration of the work or ability to anticipate costs with confidence.</p>

4.2 Examples

Example 1: An IT scope of work that connects to goals and encourages innovation

The example below showcases an excerpt from a well-organized scope of work for a new citywide project management software. In this example, the scope of work was organized by six key project features/goals. For each goal, the City described the ideal end state, and listed 1-5 desired features. This content was presented in a concise (<1 page per goal), results-oriented manner, with mandatory functionality differentiated from nice-to-haves. This approach gave prospective vendors responsibility for solution design, while ensuring minimal functional criteria were met.

OUTLINE OF SCOPE OF WORK
Overview
1: Project transparency through data centralization
2: Robust workflow visualization
3: Facilitates collaboration
4: Promotes active project management
5: Can interface with the City's current systems
6: Secure and dependable experience in the office and field
Content Deep Dive Goal 6. Secure and dependable experience in the office and field
<p>The City requires a hosted cloud-based solution with 99.9% availability. We require access to all data, compliance with data retention/public records laws, and protection of sensitive data such as school layouts and utility infrastructures. We also expect regular updates to the software.</p> <p>Your tool should provide an intuitive, beautifully designed user experience. Drag-and-drop functionality for dashboard, process flow, and report customization would be preferred, as would automatic routing/upload of documents via Google email. Ideally, your tool will be consistent with the City's visual brand (details regarding the City's brand are available at www.gplexamplecity.gov/brand-guidelines), and should be accessible for users with disabilities under ADA Title II (see WCAG2 and Section 508 for guidance). Your tool should be available on any web browser or mobile device.</p> <p>We require in-person training as part of implementation, using a "train-the-trainer" model, with electronic resources available moving forward. The ability to conduct additional training in-house, segmented by specific user groups (i.e., administrators, project managers, contractors) is key. Ongoing support throughout the deployment phases is also critical, as designated City staff will require help desk support in order to escalate technical issues.</p> <p>Key features can be summarized as follows:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Hosted solution• Simple and intuitive user experience• Availability on any web browser or mobile device• Technical training and continued support

Example 2: A parks department scope of work that is less prescriptive and invites collaboration

The example below shows how a parks department improved a heavily prescriptive section of its scope of work for landscaping services. The original version had led vendors to prioritize compliance over impact, and had contributed to a tense working relationship between vendors and the city.

The revised language focuses on “what” the city is trying to achieve rather than “how” the vendor achieves it. In this way, it aligns vendor priorities with the city’s goal, while still effectively managing risk, without an exhaustive list of compliance requirements.

Original Procurement	Revised Procurement
<p>Minimum Equipment List (See Attachment A) for performing the work under these specifications shall be possessed by the Contractor for listed project areas at time of award of bid and maintained throughout the maintenance season. It will be determined by the city, after bid openings, whether more equipment will be required due to how many acres are actually awarded. Number of acres, slope areas and maintenance cycles will be determining factors. Any additional equipment will be purchased prior to award of bid. Mowers shall be of an appropriate size for the area being mowed. Blades shall be sharp as to give a fine, clean cut. Mower decks shall be leveled as to give an even, level cut. The equipment shall be operated at a speed and manner that poses no danger to the public and achieves the desired appearance. Contractor’s vehicles, tractors and mowers (60” deck or larger) are to be clearly identified in a visible contracting color with the name of the Contractor’s company, using minimum two (2”) inch (height) letters. The Contractor’s company name is to be permanently placed on the equipment in a location which is highly visible to the general public. The City shall approve equipment identification.</p>	<p>Proposed Equipment. The contractor shall be responsible for providing all equipment necessary to perform these services. The City is not defining equipment requirements. However, proposals should include a list of all equipment anticipated to be utilized for the scope of work.</p>

As part of this revision, the City also moved from a long list of punitive fines for damages (including \$200 fines for each instance of mowed-over trash) to performance payments. For each location in which a contractor had only one or less unacceptable reviews, the contractor received an incentive payment equal to 5% of payment earned during that period of review.

MODULE 4: WORKBOOK

4.3 DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Gather your RFP drafting team and discuss the questions below.

1. For each of the goals you developed for this RFP, with your RFP team, 1) brainstorm what activities you expect a vendor must do to meet the goal and what outputs you would expect to see produced from those activities, and 2) identify which activities are essential to achieving the outcome and which are desirable. Think of the output as the action or items that contribute to achieving the outcome. Be creative! You might sketch out the product or service or hold a group brainstorm.

2. Identify three (or more!) highly prescriptive requirements that you plan to include in the scope of work section of the RFP that you are worried that a vendor will not do unless required – why is it important that the vendor follow those specifications? Why are you worried that they will not deliver on those specifications? Is it a legal reason? If not, how might you reframe the requirement to make sure it is not overly prescriptive? *Note: We encourage you, for the items listed here, to reach out to your legal counsel contact for support in identifying which requirements are legal in nature.*

3. Indicate the risks and uncertainties for both the government and the vendor that you want to minimize in the delivery of the service you are procuring.

- What challenges and risks do you anticipate in the service delivery? For each of these risks, brainstorm strategies for minimizing the risks and discuss why you will employ these strategies, using the table below (strategies may include supplementing your goal definition, performance metrics, program requirements, or reforming your contract management approach):

Risk	Risk minimization strategy	Reason for choosing strategy
<i>Example: Fraud - Vendors will bill for things they didn't do or fabricate work.</i>	<i>Example: Audit and oversight, verification that your vendor is doing work, and interviews with program participants.</i>	<i>Example: This strategy will allow us to...</i>
<i>Example: Staff turnover - Providers will not be able to retain staff leading to long waitlists.</i>	<i>Example: Help providers find ways to incentivize staff and build workplace satisfaction.</i>	<i>Example: This strategy will allow us to...</i>

4. Using the table below, consider the payment structure options and indicate why these structures are or are not a good fit for your RFP.

Payment structure	Fit (Yes or No)	Rationale
Fixed Price		
Time and Materials		
Performance Payment		

5. For your contract, how do you expect the timing of payments to align with the delivery of the contracted services? Can you use the timing of payments to incentivize good performance? Why or why not?

4.4 DRAFTING PROMPTS

1. Write a well-organized scope of work for this service, organized either by your goals, or by categories of service to be provided. In drafting your scope of work, take the following steps:
 1. For each of the goals you developed for this RFP, describe your desired activities and outputs. Where possible, challenge your assumptions about the service model and think hard about what has to happen to meet the goal rather than to be faithful to the service model.
 2. Add all requirements that are necessary for vendors to: 1) meet regulatory or legal requirements; 2) meet city priorities; or 3) to comply with specific technical specifications. For each, consider why it is important for vendors to follow these specifications and to consider where you might reframe requirements to make sure they are not overly prescriptive.
 3. Include information that indicates how your government plans to manage risks. This could include a communication and monitoring plan, an expected project management approach, or information about the timing and structure of payments.
 4. Now that you have drafted the scope of work, review the language you have written in steps 1-3. Is there any opportunity to remove overly prescriptive requirements to allow more room for innovation?
 5. Consider the flow of your scope of work. Is it easy to follow and well-organized?

2. There may be outstanding questions that you need to answer to develop your scope of work. What additional information would you like to gather to complete your scope of work? Use the table below to outline this information and your plan for gathering it.

Additional Information Needed	Action Plan
<i>Example: The number of city employees requiring access to and training on how to use a new Fire Department Records Management System (RMS). Without this information, the Department cannot give prospective IT vendors an accurate estimate of how many staff will require training.</i>	<i>Example: 1) Review user accounts for the City's current Fire RMS system to estimate the current number of active users. 2) Speak with IT staff to understand which additional city employees should have access to the new RMS system, given improved functionality.</i>

3. Draft a “Terms of Payment” section for the RFP indicating how the vendor will be paid for the delivery of services. Indicate whether and how past performance will be used to either condition a portion of payments or to inform selection for future work/contract renewal.



RFP Writing: Metrics & Contract Management

Module 5: RFP Writing - Metrics & Contract Management

In this module, you will:

- Understand how tracking and discussing contract performance with your selected vendor throughout the life of the contract can create opportunities for continuous learning and improvement.
- Draft metrics you will use to track and measure vendor performance, identify how you will assess outcomes across different sub-groups, and draft an active contract management strategy.

5.1 Best Practices

Performance Metrics

Performance metrics are an extension of the contract goals drafted previously. Metrics create accountability by allowing you to measure whether vendors are realizing your vision of success. By regularly discussing performance with vendors through data-driven discussions, you can build accountability, inform contract renewal decisions, and better understand what it means to successfully deliver services.

Although it may seem natural to turn a contract goal into a simple, binary success metric (i.e., the goal was (or was not) achieved), a yes/no goal limits your understanding of whether the metric is improving over time and whether you and your vendors are closer to (or further away from) achieving success. In addition to understanding whether a service is effective, appropriate performance metrics also yield insights into how your vendor is delivering a service, what components of the service model are working well, disparities in who is benefiting from a service, and where there is room for improvement. Performance metrics should therefore aim to measure project success as well as improve your understanding of *how* to be successful.

As you develop your set of performance metrics, consider the difference between outcome and output measures. Output measures track the activities themselves, like clients served, miles paved, software subscriptions, etc. Outcome measures track the intended results or effects of the activities, like reductions in unemployment, quality of road construction, reductions in data entry time, etc. Your RFP should include a mix of both outcome and output performance metrics. Finally, you might find it helpful to place your performance metrics within a logic model, noting the desired outcomes and then determining the inputs and outputs to track to see whether you are heading towards your desired results.

For each metric, you will want to devise a clear plan for how that metric is generated, who is responsible for generating it, where the data will be stored, and how and when it will be shared. One

tip for developing this plan is to keep things as simple as possible. There are many information management and enterprise data systems that can facilitate data generation and sharing, and you should consider leveraging the tools already at your government's disposal. However, a simple standardized excel spreadsheet or a web-based form can often work well. Most importantly, the data generation and sharing process should not be confusing or administratively cumbersome.

Consider the following tips for effectively defining performance metrics in your RFP:

KEY CONCEPT: CHARACTERISTICS OF AN EFFECTIVE PERFORMANCE METRICS	
1	Orient vendors to success. Articulate goals/metrics to define success and establish a shared understanding of what both parties are working toward. Consider what success looks like for different sub-groups impacted by your contract, especially different racial groups or neighborhoods.
2	Keep it (relatively) simple. Too few metrics may make it hard to fully understand performance. Too many metrics may make it hard for vendors to understand what is most important to focus on. While you will brainstorm at least five metrics in this module, you may ultimately find that it only makes sense to track one or two metrics and dive deep into analysis of outcomes by sub-groups within those one or two metrics. Additionally, metrics that are composite measures are often too complex to be operationally meaningful. Avoid metrics that are formulated by aggregating multiple data inputs, resulting in measures that make it difficult to attribute trends to specific changes in the work the vendor is doing.
3	Balance output and outcome measures. Including outcome metrics is crucial to understand whether the vendor is on track to meet your desired goals. Ideally, outcome metrics include a combination of short-term and long-term measures. Output measures are important for understanding how the contract is being executed and to identify the mechanisms that drive success on outcomes, however, without also including outcome measures, it is difficult to say if a contract is truly achieving the desired results.
4	Identify data tracking responsibility. Note within the RFP when and how you will be relying on the vendor to provide data. Consider using metrics that are based on existing or administrative data, as these may be a lower burden for the vendor to provide, can be more complete, and may reduce the risk of false reporting.
5	Be consistent. Use consistent metrics when contracting with multiple providers for the same good/service in order to compare performance between vendors and combine performance across contracts to understand system-wide impact.
6	Leave room to learn. Asking vendors to propose a metric for the quality or success of the contract is a helpful strategy when you want to leverage the expertise of the vendor community. Reserve the right to adjust goals/metrics once programs are up and running, and analyze data by different sub-group characteristics (e.g., race, gender, neighborhood, or client profile).

Preparing for Active Contract Management

In addition to specifying the performance metrics in the RFP, you will also signal to vendors the roles and responsibilities for collecting performance metrics and the process by which you plan to review this data with vendors. The GPL calls this process “active contract management” (ACM). ACM features the following components:

- High-frequency reviews of real-time performance data: Frequently reviewing performance metrics enables agencies and vendors to identify problems before they become ingrained or too far off course.
- Regular, executive-level meetings between the government and vendors focused on operational insights: ACM meetings between vendors and government create built-in opportunities to swiftly troubleshoot problems and identify ways to replicate success. Critically, in these regular meetings, vendors and departments have solutions-oriented conversations that connect current performance to the design and operations of the specific project or program. These meetings also facilitate transparency into department decision-making and vendor improvement efforts, resulting in greater trust.
- Collaborations to implement changes that improve results: ACM empowers leaders to quickly detect performance trends, make consistent improvements, and identify opportunities for reengineering service delivery systems to achieve better outcomes.

Much of the work of active contract management begins after contract execution, but the RFP offers an important opportunity to share with vendors that you plan to develop a collaborative relationship focused on contract performance.

More information about active contract management is available on GPL’s website at: <https://govlab.hks.harvard.edu/active-contract-management>.

5.2 Examples

Performance Metrics

Imagine that you work in a Department of Social Services that is issuing an RFP for a vendor to run a financial counseling program for low-income individuals. You want to identify metrics that can help you keep track of the day-to-day operations of the vendor (and know when it would be helpful to course correct!). However, you also know that without tracking the outcomes of the services, you might not be able to show your Department Manager the impact on the lives of residents. Here is a sample of output and outcome metrics you might plan to include:

<i>Output Metrics (metrics which aim to track the activities conducted)</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Number of financial counseling program participants served within 10 days of referral• Number of financial counseling program participants attending 6-month follow up visit• Percentage of financial counseling program participants who are undocumented (a focus population for the program)
<i>Outcome Metrics (metrics which aim to track the results of the activities conducted)</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Percentage of financial counseling program participants with reduced debt one year following referral• Percentage of financial counseling program participants with credit scores raised by >50 points one year following referral• Percentage of financial counseling program participants with stable employment at two-year mark following referral• Analysis of how these outcomes vary by different racial groups and other client demographics

Performance Metrics in Practice

One city human services department that the GPL worked with defined new performance metrics and used active contract management (ACM) techniques in their contracts with homeless shelter service providers.

In the past, metrics for homelessness service providers were inconsistent, sometimes even across the same program type, and focused primarily on counting activities rather than measuring outcomes. To better understand program impact, the department collaborated with providers to identify consistent metrics that accurately measure program performance in real-time and can be aggregated to understand system-wide progress.

The department also set up a system to regularly review program performance data to identify homelessness trends and challenges in delivering effective services. Using this information, the department and providers could swiftly and collaboratively develop solutions to achieve better outcomes. The department implemented i) monthly meetings with each provider, ii) quarterly internal meetings, and iii) quarterly executive meetings with groups of providers serving the same target population.

With these data and an active contract management meeting structure, the department will be able to 1) compare the performance of similar programs, 2) identify characteristics or strategies of high-performing programs and share best practices amongst providers, and 3) understand system-wide progress in moving people from homelessness to permanent housing.

MODULE 5: WORKBOOK

5.3 DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Gather your RFP drafting team and discuss the questions below.

1. Following the tips outlined above, start by taking the goals you drafted earlier and convert each goal into something that could be measured (by either the jurisdiction or the vendor).

You may find it helpful to put each of your outcome goals within the context of a logic model, similar to the structure below:

Planned Activities (to become part of your scope of work)		Effects of Planned Activities (your outcome goals and performance metrics)	
Inputs	Activities	Outputs	Outcome Goals (Short or Long Term)
<i>Government and vendor resources that will go towards the program (e.g., staff and funding)</i>	<i>Organized activities conducted as part of the program (e.g., services offered, outreach conducted)</i>	<i>Direct products of program activities (e.g., the number of participants receiving the services)</i>	<i>Changes in program participants as a result of program participation (e.g., an increase in participants' academic achievement, or whether they started a small business)</i>

2. What aspects of contract performance do you anticipate discussing with your vendor in a meeting at the following periods: monthly, quarterly, annually, or as needed? What data will you review with your vendor at each of the following periods? Who will be responsible for leading, planning, and bringing information to each meeting? What other individuals will be a part of the meeting?

<i>Frequency</i>	Topics & Data	Participant Roles
Monthly:		
Quarterly:		
Annually:		
As needed:		

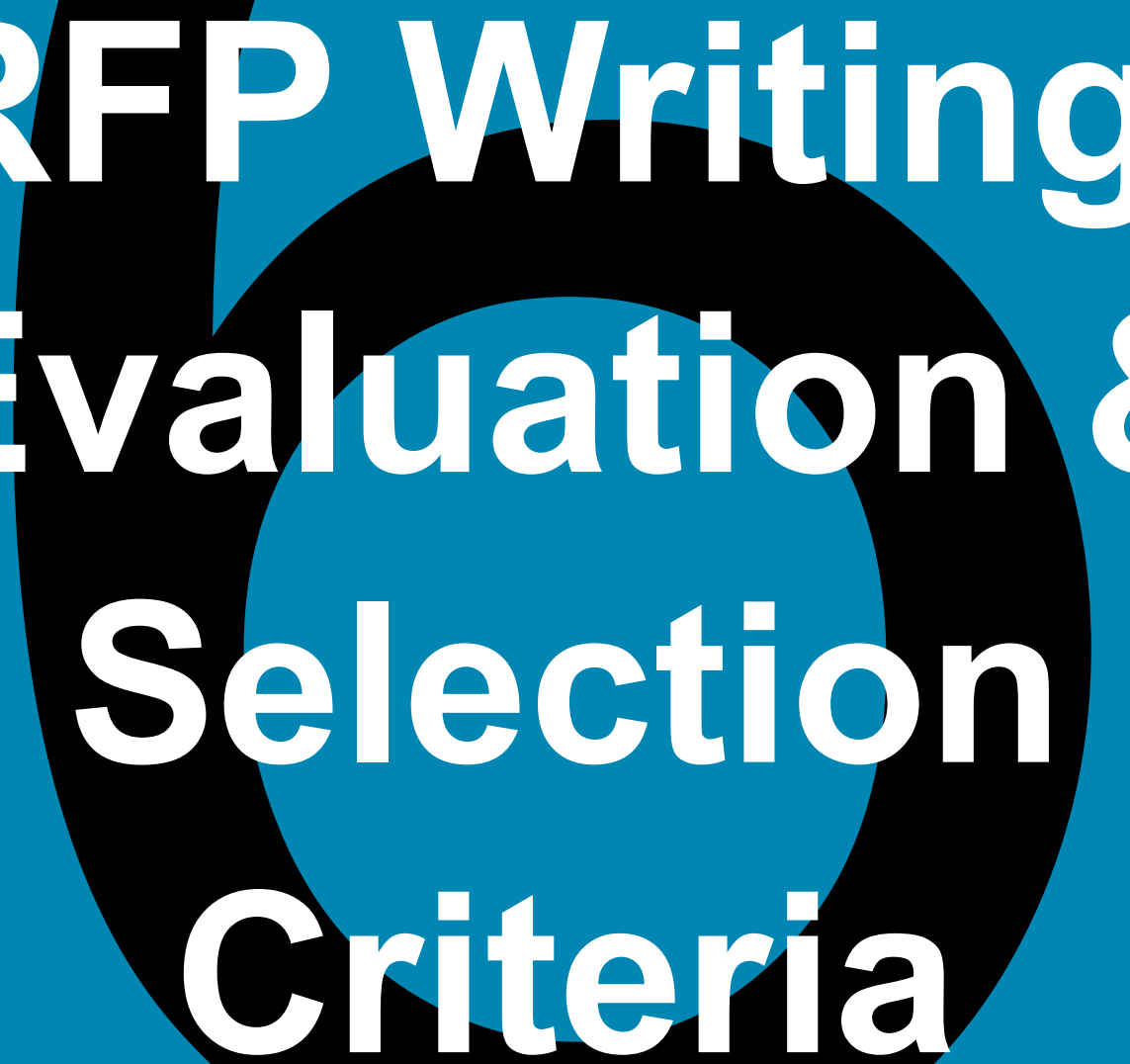
3. What information systems or tools can you use to generate, collect, track and analyze the data? (E.g., Excel spreadsheets or Google Forms for capturing inspections data)

5.4 DRAFTING PROMPTS

1. Drawing on the discussion questions above, draft a set of performance metrics to be included in your RFP. There should be at least two draft performance metrics for every goal you outlined in the last spreadsheet, and at least six performance metrics in total. For each metric, indicate who is responsible for collecting the data, how they will collect it, and how often it will be collected. (Note: A table, like the one below, may be a useful way to present this information in the RFP.)

Metric	Data Source	Data Frequency	Responsibility
<i>Example: Number of validated citizen complaints received related to landscape services.</i>	<i>Example: City's 311 call log and email submissions.</i>	<i>Example: The City will review data with the vendor at monthly meetings.</i>	<i>Example: Parks Dept. staff will tabulate this data on a monthly basis.</i>

2. Drawing on your responses from the above set of questions, draft a few paragraphs to be included in your RFP that describe how you will meet regularly with vendors to review performance metrics (i.e., your active contract management strategy).



RFP Writing: Evaluation & Selection Criteria

Module 6: RFP Writing - Evaluation & Selection Criteria

In this module, you will:

- Understand how adding transparency to your evaluation criteria can help proposers gain better clarity on how the evaluation team will assess their proposals.
- Learn how tailored, well-organized proposal submittal requirements can facilitate an easier evaluation process.
- Draft a set of evaluation criteria and proposal submission requirements.

6.1 Best Practices

Evaluation and Selection Criteria

At this point in drafting your RFP, you probably have a good sense of what work you want a vendor to do! However, you will need to select the vendor best able to deliver the services required to achieve your goals. This module will help you learn more about how to draft a set of evaluation criteria to assess the proposals you receive. You will also develop a clear idea of the different components you would like a prospective vendor to include in their proposal.

Proposal Submission Requirements

A prospective vendor's proposal is the primary opportunity for the vendor to show how they can meet your goals, solve the problems you face, and accomplish the scope of work. Generally, the proposal will be an opportunity for the proposer to tell you about how they meet your service requirements, what budget they can offer, whether they have the skills and qualifications you seek, and whether they have strong past performance doing similar work. The information you ask the proposer to submit should be the information you truly need to make a decision!

Depending on the RFP content, proposal submission requirements will vary. Regardless of the proposal submission requirements you include, it is important to put yourself in the shoes of the proposer, and to check that the submission requirements are clear and directly tied to either evaluation criteria, or government legal and policy requirements.

Sometimes, it can make sense to minimize requiring long narrative responses and instead ask for multiple short answer responses in a questionnaire format. By asking shorter, tailored questions, you can often solicit specific needed information about a proposer's experience, or understand the unique way they might approach a problem you have. This also allows you to focus vendors on your department's priorities for service delivery and tie successful responses to addressing these priorities.

Often, it is also beneficial to provide a separate submission template and budget template, incorporating all of the required information and questions you need a vendor to answer (rather than embedding this information in the RFP text), which can make it especially easy for a vendor to understand what they will need to submit in their proposal. Both minimizing the burden of multi-page narratives and using submission templates can also make responses more consistent and easier to evaluate.

Developing Evaluation Criteria

In an RFP, you have the opportunity to consider factors other than the lowest bid in how you select your vendors. The cumulative set of evaluation factors should allow you to identify the best solution or vendor that meets your full set of needs. Developing evaluation criteria that fairly and accurately assess what a proposer can bring to the table and how well their proposal meets your goals, budget, and service requirements is a key step in making sure that your procurement is results-focused. You certainly will not be able to meet your intended outcomes if you have not hired the right vendor for the job!

Furthermore, by clearly spelling out “how you will choose” from the proposals you receive, you help the proposer further understand your vision of success by articulating all the factors that you predict would enable a vendor to be a successful partner for your jurisdiction. As an example, consider an RFP that selects a vendor based 70% on price, and 30% on staff’s prior experience. By omitting a category around “project plan” or “approach”, you will not know about the vendor’s plan for how to accomplish your goals.

KEY CONCEPT: CHARACTERISTICS OF GOOD EVALUATION CRITERIA

1	<p>Connect to your specific outcome goals, metrics, and scope of work.</p> <p>The evaluation criteria should flow from the prior sections of your RFP, as a logical continuation of your goals, metrics, and scope of work.</p>
2	<p>Give the right balance between multiple priorities.</p> <p>The evaluation criteria generally should not weigh any one criterion too highly. If one criterion heavily outweighs the others, make sure you have good justification, and understand how the weighing might strongly influence selection. For example, focusing too heavily on price can come at the detriment of other equally important evaluation criteria that might help you assess the vendor's ability to deliver results.</p>
3	<p>Provide sufficient information to let proposers know what a successful response looks like.</p> <p>Generally, you and your evaluation committee should have a clear idea of what a high scoring proposal would look like in each criterion before evaluations begin. Depending on the RFP, it can be helpful to share this information with proposers. Furthermore, if a criterion includes multiple different sub-components, designating points for the sub-components can help proposers and reviewers pay sufficient attention to each unique dimension of a criterion. For example, you might have a category called "work experience," but within that category you might designate points for each different aspect of "work experience," which could include components such as "project management experience" and "municipal finance experience."</p>
4	<p>Clearly align to proposal responses and submittals requested.</p> <p>Each evaluation criteria should connect to one or more pieces of information that a proposer submits. Take time to reflect on each piece of information that you are asking a proposer to submit and consider whether it will tell you what you need to know to assess a proposer on the evaluation criterion to which it corresponds.</p>
5	<p>Are fair to all proposers, free of bias, consistent, and not overly restrictive.</p> <p>You should ensure that all evaluation criteria are fair, and do not give a preference to incumbent vendors. If you are establishing minimum requirements, they should not be so limiting that they weed out vendors who could actually perform the job well, especially small and minority firms. What underlying biases might be present in your evaluation criteria, the makeup of your evaluation panel, or in the evaluation process that could unnecessarily advantage or disadvantage certain types of proposers?</p>

6.2 Example

The example below shows evaluation criteria from a city that issued an RFP to hire a local non-profit to administer and manage an economic mobility program that had previously been run in-house. In this RFP, by sharing the relative importance of the evaluation criteria, and by breaking out the specific qualification areas that the city was interested in knowing more about, the city was able to have an improved understanding of a proposer's specific strengths and qualifications. In the right column, we share what the city asked proposers to submit in each qualification area.

EVALUATION CRITERIA	
<i>Qualification Area</i>	<i>Proposal submittal information</i>
ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY AND EXPERIENCE (XX%) Based upon the respondent's overall capacity and experience that is relevant to the work in this RFP, and demonstrated ability to provide successful program management, technical and data expertise, partnership management, and fundraising efforts during the term of the contract. The City understands that an organization might need to hire for new capacity, and may give full credit to responses that present a thoughtful, realistic plan about how new capacity and expertise will be hired or developed.	Five short-answer questions asking about the proposer's capacity and experience in relevant topic areas.
METHOD OF APPROACH (XX%) Referring to the soundness of the proposer's planned approach to the project, including ability to address current and future challenges, planned approach to working in partnership with the City, evidence of organizational buy-in, and proposed staffing approach.	Four short-answer questions asking about the proposer's approach, ability to tackle challenges outlined in the RFP, and plan to work collaboratively with the City.
EQUITY AND ECONOMIC MOBILITY APPROACH (XX%) Based upon the respondent's understanding and planned approach to address equity and economic mobility in program design, execution and administration.	Three short-answer questions assessing the proposer's ability to consider equity in their efforts and understand the needs of the target population.
BUDGET AND RESOURCE ALLOCATION (XX%) Referring to the respondent's planned approach to allocate City financial resources and ability to supplement those resources with in-kind or outside support. The Issuing Office reserves the right to negotiate a final project price and scope in accordance with the City Code of Ordinances.	Proposers completed a cost proposal outlining their plan to allocate financial resources and supplement with outside or in-kind support.

MODULE 6: WORKBOOK

6.3 DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Gather your RFP drafting team and discuss the questions below.

1. Think back about the goals and scope of work that you drafted. For each of those goals, what would you need to know about a company to know whether they could meet those goals and accomplish your scope of work?

2. Imagine the perfect vendor -- one that would lead to 100% satisfaction at the end of the contract. Put down a few words about your “dream” vendor. What experience and qualifications would they have? How would you work with them? What staff would be on the project? What price would they offer?

3. Do you have any absolute requirements that a prospective vendor would need to meet for you to consider them for this project/service?

Note: Consider the minimum amount of experience, qualifications, licenses, or permits needed. However, remember that you do not want to be too restrictive or you may disqualify a perfectly capable vendor, or a small or minority business very capable of doing the work! If something is not a deal breaker, but rather a preference, consider whether you could incorporate it in the evaluation criteria rather than as a minimum requirement.

4. (Optional) If you anticipate awarding multiple contracts from this RFP, what information will you collect from proposers that helps you to distribute the work among selected vendors?

Note: Consider whether you need unique evaluation criteria for different service types, or whether you need proposers to tell you what areas of the city/or types of work they are interested in being considered for.

6.4 DRAFTING PROMPTS

1. Drawing on your responses from the above set of questions, write a set of evaluation criteria that reflect the characteristics of good evaluation criteria, which you will include in your RFP. As you write these, remember that clear, reasonable criteria will also make the process easier for your evaluation team. Include the percentage weight of the total that each evaluation criterion will be worth (or number of points), and a few sentences describing what a top score would look like for each criteria. The first row provides an example answer.

Evaluation Criterion	% of total points (or number of points)	What would a top score look like?
<i>Example: Performance History</i>	<i>Example: 20% of total</i>	<i>Example: Proposer has no history of major performance problems as reported in their proposal, and all references report excellent quality work.</i>

2. After drafting your evaluation criteria, consider what information a proposer will submit to allow you to assess how well they meet the criteria. Using the table below, indicate in the first column: the evaluation criterion, and in the second column: what a proposer will submit that connects to that evaluation criterion.

Note: If price, be clear about how the price information will be collected – fixed lump sum cost? Monthly cost? Additionally, it can often be helpful to conduct interviews or product demos to help you go beyond just written responses to know whether a company is qualified to help you reach your goals (especially as part of a second round evaluation). Finally, for submission requirements that do not align with the evaluation criteria but exist for legal or policy reasons, put N/A under the evaluation criterion it connects with.

Evaluation Criterion	Proposal Submission Component	Notes
<i>Example: Past Experience</i>	<i>Example: Short Answer Question - "Please tell us about your experience providing similar services to City governments."</i>	<i>Example: Proposer will submit a 400-word overview of their experience providing similar services to City governments.</i>

A large, bold, black number 7 is positioned diagonally across the page, starting from the top left and extending towards the bottom right. It serves as a background element for the title.

Finalizing Your RFP

Module 7: Finalizing Your RFP

In this module, you will:

- Understand best practices for organizing and structuring your RFP draft, and identify how best to solicit feedback on your RFP draft.

7.1 Best Practices

You now have most of the major substantive components of your RFP, including a problem statement, goals and objectives, metrics and a contract management plan, a scope of work, payment structure, evaluation and selection criteria, and proposer response specifics. It is time to begin putting the pieces together to form a full RFP draft!

How to Structure Your RFP

Your jurisdiction may have a defined RFP template or structure you are required to follow. If you have flexibility with the structure, you might consider organizing your RFP in the following order. The bolded areas refer to the specific RFP components you developed in prior modules.

Sample RFP Outline:

1. Title page and/or summary page with key project dates, facts and contact information
2. Table of contents
3. The opportunity
 - Project summary and **outcome goals**
 - **Problem statement**
 - Other relevant background information
4. Scope of work
 - **Description of services to be provided**
 - **Performance metrics and active contract management plan**
5. Proposal content and submission process
 - **Submission requirements and checklist**
 - Information about schedule, pre-proposal conference, how to submit questions, deadline, and submittal process
6. How we choose
 - **Evaluation criteria**
 - Selection process, and protest information
7. Terms and conditions
8. Attachments, exhibits and required forms (e.g., template contract, pricing sheet, or diagrams)

You will notice that we have not discussed some of these sections in this guidebook, such as “Terms and Conditions.” Some components of RFPs are very specific to each jurisdiction, and you likely have required legal and policy language already developed that will become part of your RFP.

If your jurisdiction or department does not already have an RFP template, once you have an organization and structure that you have found to work well on a few RFPs, consider creating one. A template can reduce internal drafting and review time, and let you focus more on updating the specific sections that need to change from one RFP to the next. A consistent RFP appearance can also make the experience of responding to an RFP more familiar for proposers! We recommend jurisdictions revisit and consider updating their template every few years.

Regardless of how you choose to organize your RFP, it is important to keep in mind that your RFP should be a friendly and welcoming document. Picture a person or team trying their best to offer you a strong proposal – does your RFP facilitate that? Make it easy for the proposer to understand exactly what you want them to submit, exactly how they will be evaluated, and exactly what work they will be expected to do if selected as a vendor. Also clearly and honestly share what you don't know, and where you want vendors to offer their creative approaches or expertise in solving your problem! Keep in mind that your RFP is the first signal of what it will be like to work with your team and your department, so help the vendor see that your government will be a great client. Here are some tips:

- Make the document easily navigable by including page numbers, descriptive section headers, and a table of contents.
- Place important project-specific information at the front of the document, and terms and conditions towards the end.
- Write for humans! Do not use agency-specific terms or complex jargon that might be hard for an outsider to understand.
- Keep your RFP to a reasonable length! Think critically about whether components of your RFP add value to either the proposer's understanding of the work, or the legal or policy requirements that govern the process.

What to Look for When Reviewing Your RFP

Once you have a solid draft of your RFP, you should gather members of your team and other internal experts for an internal RFP presentation. During this meeting, present the RFP draft, identify assumptions, and poke holes in your team's thinking and structure. This meeting is also a great moment to ask critical questions and revisit the findings of your stakeholder research to be sure you have addressed major concerns in the RFP. Keep in mind that by including team members who have not been as "in the weeds" on RFP drafting, you can often surface great ideas.

Using a checklist to run through your RFP can be helpful to make sure there are not any concerns before publishing. Here are examples of items for which you might check:

- Does the RFP flow in a logical manner? Does it feel like each section builds off the previous one?
- Do you clearly indicate why the RFP is being issued and what the desired outcome of the procurement is?
- For every submission requirement, is it clear what the proposer needs to do or submit to respond to that requirement? Is it clear how the submission requirements connect to the evaluation criteria?
- Is the RFP fair? Is there any language that gives specific vendors an advantage or that preferences the incumbent vendor? Do your evaluation criteria reward certain vendor characteristics that do not actually correspond with what is needed to do the work? Is the timeline for responses likely to make it difficult for certain firms to respond?
- Do you provide the proposer with key dates and an estimated timeline?
- Do you indicate how your staff will respond to questions proposers may have while the RFP is open?

7.2 Examples

The Government Performance Lab has many examples of RFPs that incorporate these results-driven contracting techniques on our website: <https://govlab.hks.harvard.edu/government-documents>. We also encourage you to take a look at our Results-Driven Contracting Solutions Book: https://govlab.hks.harvard.edu/files/results_driven_contracting_brief.pdf.

Making your RFP succinct and straightforward can do wonders to make the RFP and associated process inviting for proposers. The City of Boston demonstrated this in 2015 with their RFP to solicit a redesign of their main government website – boston.gov. The City structured this RFP as a slide deck: https://www.cityofboston.gov/Images/Documents/COB_Web_DesignRFP2.pdf

MODULE 7: WORKBOOK

7.3 DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Gather your RFP drafting team and discuss the questions below.

1. Return to the RFP components that you completed in past modules. If some time has passed since your team drafted some of these components, consider the following: has anything changed about your understanding of the problem or goals as you have drafted other RFP sections? Is there some additional research you need to conduct to make sure what you are asking of proposers and vendors is reasonable?

2. If any additional questions have come up during RFP drafting, make a list of the remaining questions that you will need to answer with your RFP team. Additionally, think about what your action plan might be to resolve those last remaining questions.

3. What will your plan be for ensuring that all interested parties hear about your RFP? With your team, put together an outreach strategy focused on obtaining vendor diversity. You might include:

- Websites where the RFP or a link to the opportunity could be posted publicly. If you work for a city or county, explore whether any state vendor portals or advertising platforms could host notice of your RFP.
- Make a list of vendors that could receive notification of the opportunity. Consider especially how you might advertise to and seek out minority, small and women-owned businesses. What companies are qualified to do the work, but may historically not have obtained their proportional share of contracting opportunities from your jurisdiction?
- Send to industry and trade groups or other associations.
- Issue a press release if this is a very high-priority RFP to which your government wants to draw major attention.

7.4 DRAFTING PROMPT

1. Your task in this module is to combine the previously drafted sections of your RFP with any additional necessary information to create your RFP draft, and take proper review and approval steps to finalize your RFP for release.



Activities Following RFP Release

Module 8: Activities Following RFP Release

In this module, you will:

- Understand best practices for major steps following RFP release, including hosting a pre-proposal conference, evaluating proposals received, and drafting and negotiating your contract.

8.1 Best Practices

Below we share best practices related to major steps after you have released your RFP:

Hosting a Pre-Proposal Conference

The pre-proposal conference is an exciting opportunity for prospective vendors to ask questions and hear about your goals. Take extra care to be well-prepared and identify roles and responsibilities for the pre-proposal conference – this event is often how vendors get their first impression of what your government will be like to work with as a client!

When planning for your pre-proposal conference, note that proposers have different levels of familiarity with your government's contracting rules. Nearly always, proposers will ask questions about your scope of work or requirements during the pre-proposal conference. Make sure to identify who is legally able to provide answers to proposers - in many jurisdictions it must be the contracting officer or the procurement unit. It can be helpful to develop a preparation document ahead of time that includes draft answers to questions you anticipate. If a question asked requires research, you should not feel obligated to answer it on the spot. Share all questions answered during the pre-proposal conference and received by email or phone in a public document or RFP addendum that all prospective vendors can access.

Receiving and Evaluating Proposals

Generally, once you receive proposals, your government will conduct a “pre-screening” or “threshold review” to make sure that proposals received are responsive and compliant before the evaluation committee conducts its formal evaluation. The evaluation committee will only evaluate proposals that have passed this threshold review (generally called “responsive” proposals). It sometimes can be difficult to ascertain whether a proposer's failure to fill out a page of a form should cause them to be found non-responsive or whether it should be waived as a minor administrative error. Consult with your legal or purchasing team for guidance.

Building your evaluation team is an important part of ensuring that you select the most qualified proposer. As you build your evaluation team, make sure:

- **You are including diverse perspectives and appropriate technical expertise.** Consider including individuals from outside your department or agency, including representatives from community organizations or service recipients. You may also find it helpful to bring in advisory members that can offer additional technical expertise.

- **Your evaluation team understands your vision of what an ideal vendor looks like.** To ensure all evaluators are on the same page, schedule a kick-off meeting or evaluator training to discuss your evaluation plan, review your objectives and come to a shared understanding of what you seek. Useful tools for training evaluators can include: 1) developing a scoring guide that defines strong and weak responses; 2) using a sample response from a prior RFP that everyone scores and reviews together as a practice run; and 3) helping evaluators to look for response quality, not just whether the question was answered (e.g., don't allocate points simply if training was included in a response, but instead gauge the quality of a training plan).
- **Your team has no perceived or apparent conflict of interest, is able to provide an objective and impartial evaluation, and can maintain confidentiality.** In the case of evaluators, a conflict of interest can come from an evaluator having an existing relationship or affiliation with one of the proposers or a stake in having one entity win the contract. Another important conflict to avoid is having two individuals on the evaluation committee where one individual supervises another individual. This could create the appearance that not all members of the evaluation committee have equal say.

Although done rarely, conducting a blind review of proposals may be a tool to allow for a completely unbiased review process when contracting for some types of services. If this is the case, the evaluated proposal documents must not contain any names that might identify who the proposer is and proper instructions to ensure this should be included in the RFP. Additionally, it may be necessary to scrub any additional identifying information off proposals before the evaluation committee reviews.

Holding Interviews, Demos or Site Visits

In your RFP, you may have specified a second round evaluation of interviews, site visits, or demos with short-listed proposers before making a final selection. Interviews and demos are the primary opportunity to meet and evaluate the key staff members assigned to the project by the proposer and go deeper on proposal substance. If you conduct interviews, best practice is to keep them short and require that the interviewees are staff who will be working directly on the project (rather than marketing or sales staff).

You might consider integrating information from interviews, demos or site visits into your scoring protocol in one of the following ways, depending on your jurisdiction's procurement rules: a) conduct interviews/demos/site visits before scores are finalized and allow reviewers to adjust scores based on additional information gathered; or b) assign interviews a separate set of points that reviewers allocate in addition to points from written proposals.

Selecting Vendors for Award and Negotiating the Contract

The steps involved in final vendor selection vary from one jurisdiction to another. Regardless of any constraints you face, consider this moment an opportunity to carry out due diligence checks, identify what flexibility you have to adjust the scope of work before it is incorporated into the final contract, and clarify the proposer's planned approach.

The contract negotiation phase offers your team an opportunity to set expectations for vendors around how you will measure performance over the course of the contract as well as a chance to negotiate pricing and other contract terms. Facilitating internal discussions before contract negotiations take place may be helpful for your

team to align on the points they wish to negotiate. The goal from the negotiation is to emerge with an agreement that captures all services required by your government, with a quality level, schedule, and price that is agreeable to both parties.

The negotiation process is the beginning of a good working relationship with the vendor. Establishing mutual goals for a “win-win” situation will help to develop a well-written, comprehensive contract that will further this relationship. Major benefits of a successful negotiation last throughout the contract duration – completion of a successful project or service and a vendor who is motivated to bid on other projects with your government.

Debriefing Unsuccessful Proposers

Offering unsuccessful proposers a debrief is an opportunity to exchange constructive feedback both ways, allowing you to develop better relationships with prospective vendors and increasing the capacity of small and minority proposers to respond to future RFPs. This debrief can also give you valuable feedback on your RFP process.

Debriefing information given to proposers should be factual and consistent with scoring. In a professional manner, discuss the strengths and weaknesses of their proposal, including sharing in which areas they did not score as high as the successful proposer did. However, you should not feel obligated to provide a point-by-point comparison or direct reference to other proposers.

Hosting an After Action Review

Following the completion of the evaluation of proposals, it can be helpful to have a meeting with the entire team involved in the procurement to discuss what aspects of the procurement

process succeeded or failed. Sometimes this type of meeting is called an “after action review.” By drawing conclusions about what went well in the procurement process and what could be done differently next time (while information and insights are still fresh!), you can preserve institutional knowledge and identify opportunities to improve the next time a similar RFP process is conducted.

Some questions to ask in this meeting could include:

- How many proposers did we expect and how many proposals did we receive?
- What other actions could we have taken to help a more diverse group of firms/ organizations participate in the RFP process?
- How long did we expect the procurement process to take? How long did it actually take?
- Were any proposers non-responsive? Why did we find them non-responsive? Are there any steps we can take to clarify the requirements better in the future?
- What worked well and why?
- What can be improved and how?

Managing and Monitoring the Contract

Once you have moved into the contract management phase, one of your key areas of focus is to develop and maintain an environment in which the vendor can succeed. Your vendor is, above all, a partner in helping you achieve your government’s goals and realizing the outcomes you want to see! To be successful, you will need to coordinate and aim towards common goals, motivate your vendor, and establish an environment of trust where vendors can be upfront about the problems they are facing.

As discussed earlier in this guidebook, in most service contracts, it can be hugely beneficial to meet with the vendor regularly to discuss their

performance and look at how they are meeting specific performance metrics that you have established in the RFP and the contract. The motivation for actively managing your vendor is that you:

- Know whether your vendor is providing services at a standard level of quality
- Help your vendor to continuously improve.
- Immediately become aware of defects in the service provision and provide a response.

You can achieve your goals through the following techniques:

- **Regular reviews of real-time performance data.** Frequently reviewing performance metrics associated with your contracts allows you to rapidly identify major problems before they become ingrained or unfixable.
- **Regular, collaborative meetings between vendors and departments.** In these meetings, you can have solutions-oriented conversations that connect current performance to the design and support of a specific project or program. These meetings also facilitate transparency into department decision-making and vendor improvement efforts, resulting in greater trust. Establish the appropriate cadence for these meetings early on. From these meetings, you will jointly identify operational changes and other methods to improve vendor performance.
- **Reports from the vendor and periodic performance reviews.** Establish procedures for receiving reports from the vendor and for preparing evaluations. You may also find it necessary to assess performance through periodic, random spot checks. A formal written evaluation of performance at the end of the contract can provide a helpful record of performance when you consider whether you will renew the contract, or if the vendor bids on future contracting opportunities in your jurisdiction.

8.2 Example

To make performance improvement a key focus during the term of a contract, one state government encourages state agencies to incorporate the below language (or an adapted version of it) into their contracts. This language helps to establish an ongoing collaboration with vendors to improve performance.

The State of X seeks to actively and regularly collaborate with the vendor and other stakeholders to enhance accountability and contract management, improve results, and adjust the delivery of products or services based upon learning what works.

As part of this effort, the State expects all awarded vendors to adhere to the following principles of active contract management in order to improve the performance of contracted products and services over time.

1. Defined Performance Objectives. The vendor and the State recognize the importance of defining key performance objectives that the contracted products or service (s) are intended to accomplish. Performance objectives inform data fields to be collected, outcome and indicator metrics to be reported, and trends to be monitored.

2. Reliable Data Collection and Reporting. The vendor and State recognize that reliable and relevant data is necessary to ensure contract compliance, evaluate contract results, and drive improvements and policy decisions. Sharing data between the vendor and the State on a regular basis can ensure that key stakeholders operate with a common understanding of performance and trends.

3. Consistent and Collaborative Meetings to Review and Improve Performance. The vendor and the State recognize that regular reviews of and conversations around performance, results and data, particularly related to the defined performance objectives, will allow the State and vendors to employ real-time information to track performance, identify good practice, and swiftly, collaboratively, and effectively address any challenges.

MODULE 8: WORKBOOK

8.3 DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Gather your RFP drafting team and discuss the questions below.

1. Who would be most appropriate to include on your evaluation team? How can you represent a diversity of opinions and perspectives, and include sufficient technical expertise?

2. How would holding an interview, demo or site visit help you better assess your proposers' qualifications, expertise, and ideas? What types of questions might be best to ask in this setting?

3. What do you anticipate will be difficult topics of contract negotiation? What research can you do in advance about the selected proposer to be prepared? What negotiation points is your government willing to compromise on with the selected proposer? What do you consider non-negotiable?

8.4 DRAFTING PROMPT

Draft language that you will incorporate into your contract that signals to the vendor: 1) how and who will regularly track key performance metrics during the course of the contract, and 2) what conversations and regular meetings will be held during the contract term to discuss contract performance and the vendor's progress toward meeting your overall objectives.

Closing

Closing

We hope you walk away from this guidebook feeling equipped with a toolbox of strategies that you can apply to RFPs you will work on now and in the future. As you know, the development of any RFP is more than just placing a scope of work into a template. Each new RFP is a strategic opportunity to understand more deeply the problem you face and gain clarity on the results your government wants to achieve, so that you and your selected vendor are able to work in partnership towards your vision. Now that you have learned and practiced results-driven contracting strategies, we encourage you to champion these practices within your jurisdiction. We wish you nothing but success in your future RFPs!

This content was developed by the Government Performance Lab (GPL)'s research project on procurement excellence. In 2025, GPL's procurement team launched a new nonprofit, Partners for Public Good. The Government Performance Lab is grateful for support from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Bloomberg Philanthropies, the California Endowment, Casey Family Programs, the Corporation for National and Community Service Social Innovation Fund, the Dunham Fund, the Endowment for Health, the Ford Foundation, the Laura and John Arnold Foundation, the New Hampshire Charitable Foundation, the Pritzker Children's Initiative, Results for America, and the Rockefeller Foundation.